

Ace Boggess

“What If I Die Here?”

question asked by Savannah Dudley

The prison in which you've caught contagion
resembles four free walls of my isolation

from distance so great earliest alien telescopes would fail
to find us. Can one take solace

in the unity of insignificance?

Each of us will be buried in the period after this sentence.

Let's experiment with overcoming, moving.

Meanwhile, keep on living.

Srinjay Chakravarti

DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

The mountain's bones creak
Under the wind's dark weight;
Skeletal trees
Twist their nerves and sinews
On the stone spool of its torso.
Heavy with dark static,
The wooden fingers
Crack their knuckles
Against the gouache of the night.
Bare leafless branches
Comb the screaming wind—
Clawing against the starlit void
In desperate hope.

THE CAMOUFLAGE ROOM

The sun, slanting
through the wooden window slats,
has tiger-striped the walls
of my living room.
The curtains, hard-muscled
under black-and-yellow fur,
rake their claws
across my sweaty face.
The furniture paces
inside the cage
of the feral summer breeze.
A Royal Bengal is on the prowl
inside my blood vessels.
Its hot fetid breath,
pungent with putrid flesh,
throbs inside my cranium.
The fridge perspires,
letting off the heavy musk
of watermelons and pomegranates
into the still, torpid air,
the headache of its compressor humming
like streak lightning inside the cloudscape
of its vascular architecture.
The sky simmers in the stillness,
a mirage above the microwave—
a hush is poised on the gossamer of rain.
On my rocking chair, the waves lap
on a tropical seashore, and my migraine
floats down the afternoon's undertow
inside my oneiric glass-bottom boat.

KEYS TO THE ATTIC

The evening sun's rusted knives
Slice through the window cracks,
The bloodied light
Leaving behind wounds and opened scabs
On the bruised, lichen-scarred walls.
The stale air is trapped
Inside the shuttered attic
Of a family's history,
Heavy with swirling motes
In the shafts of putrid yellow sunshine.
Shadows hang from the rafters
Like mildewed old coats,
Abandoned to the insidious seepage
Of a tropical city.
Here, it's a compendium
Of dark, imaginal spaces,
Inhabited by ghosts, effluvium,
And the amnesia of convenience.
All kinds of junk, the rejectamenta
Of forgotten time, flotsam and jetsam
Culled from the tideline of the lost years.
White ants and silverfish
Sneeze into the dustbins of memories.
The wrinkles on the walls,
The borders mapped out by termites
Mimic the craquelure on the tempera
paintings.
Piles of brittle, sepia diaries
And faded photo albums gather,
The marginalia between generations.
Who can dare enter here,
Dare unlock the skeletons
From the cupboards of oblivion?

Hashim Haji Mousa

Ending of Happiness

The house was full of happiness
no TV, no internet
light of lamp was gathering us every night
laughter never left our faces
one telling jokes, another telling stories
nights were going too fast
but we never thought of something called late
we made beautiful memories in every corner of the house
Everything faded in third of August, 2014
the leaves of the tree fell, as they had never been watered
that beautiful house has changed,
as it was not the source of our happiness one day
without it, sadness covered all our faces, as it has never seen happiness
with a broken heart, I go to our destroyed house every time
I look for my beautiful memories under each stone of the house
hoping to find one of them, and return my happiness
but even that, I couldn't find

Proud woman

I would start talking, but it would never end
Taking me from my mom was achievement for them
Selling me as piece of sweet was ending my existence
Raping me was their desire to change my religion
They think torturing me was getting them close to heaven
My tears flowed like the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and I never
stopped hoping for freedom
My existence is as ancient as Sumerian, so how dare you, ISIS, to wipe
out my existence

STOLEN IRIS

I hugged pain when they took her
As pieces of sweets and sold her between them
I hugged pain when I heard that she was saying
I am too little to be taken from my mom
I still want to smell my mom
I hugged pain when
I heard that she became a friend of four walls
I hugged pain
When I heard that her tears became her water and beating became her
food
At the end I ran despite all the pain, I hugged her
When I saw her coming and wearing her white original dress

Grace Shelton

This Beautiful Life

Isaac broke almost every bone in his right hand in the two minutes it took Elise to run to the bathroom. She should have predicted he'd do something like that. Elise had spent the better part of the setup time reminding Carnegie Mellon University of their responsibilities: a tuned piano, even foot pedals, a group of accompanying musicians who knew their shit. Isaac wasn't known to be forgiving with his requirements. The curtains needed lifted before he arrived—he had to survey where the audience would be. He needed a music stand thick enough for his binder of pre-sorted music and a practice space with a temperature around sixty-eight degrees. Elise thought ahead, she did. She even asked a stagehand, before taking her break, if he could make sure Isaac didn't get to the piano before all the prerequisites had been confirmed.

But the first note rang from the practice upright piano backstage, and Elise knew. She scrambled through tangled cables and wires, her belt still undone, to the sound of something slamming once, twice, three times. The stagehands formed a wide circle around Isaac, watching him lift the lid from the keys and bring it down again, then again, until his skin split and his knuckles bled. At twenty-four years old, he might have ended his piano career.

Elise herded Isaac from the stage and into the waiting car that Carnegie Mellon provided for his visit. She did not envy the university's limited staff. For the next three hours, they would be waist-deep in emails and phone calls from angry ticketholders receiving word of the cancellation. There was no backup pianist to replace Isaac in this situation. It was his damn concert, his name on the posters tacked around campus, his compositions tucked into the three-ring binders of the accompanying string quartet. *The Beautiful Life – A Night with Isaac Campbell Loyola.*

“What did I do wrong?” she asked, keeping her voice level. She pressed his bad hand against the pleather of the chauffeur’s seats, as delicately as she could without letting him free. A campus nurse had already wrapped his shattered fingers in a bandage to quell the bleeding, or perhaps to splint the bones, but it did nothing to stop little red snakes from staining his white shirt-cuffs.

He strained against her grip. “Let me go.”

“Tell me what I did.” Elise could feel fractured pieces shifting around in his palm with every tug of his arm. Getting angry with him would serve no purpose.

“Stop it. I can handle myself.”

“Look at your hand.”

Isaac glanced down and focused, as if he was trying to wiggle his fingers. Nothing moved. Really, Elise should have expected something like this. She should have called ahead and confirmed that Carnegie Mellon received and agreed to Isaac’s long list of conditions. He yanked his arm again. His hand contorted, his pinky flexing at an angle non-conducive to piano, a fresh spurt of scarlet dancing across the bandage. Elise didn’t know how much damage she could actually prevent by holding him. Dealing with Isaac always had a bit of a learning curve. When she wanted to know something, sometimes it helped to reframe the conversation, redirect the question. Elise took a deep breath. It was her responsibility to make sure that Isaac didn’t go off the deep end, and she had to be a good example.

“Can you tell me what happened in there?”

Isaac huffed. “They ruined it.”

“They were going to tune the piano.”

“I asked that it be tuned. I wanted it to already be tuned.”

Elise resisted the urge to squeeze his hand. “What did I do wrong this time?”

“Let me go.”

“Tell me what I did, so I can do it better.”

“Get your fucking hands off of me.”

Elise didn't. Whatever was left of his piano career, it relied on her keeping him from doing further damage. She knew he'd just do more damage. He thrashed about in the seat, but being twenty-four and well below average in height and weight, he wasn't the hardest to pin down. Her chest swelled with an emotion she couldn't place—not the same as hatred, not self-loathing, but something that lived in their house and ate at their table. She stomped on it. It wouldn't serve any purpose.

Maybe he didn't need his right hand to be perfect, maybe. Isaac was left-handed. Lower melodies with upper-register chords were his claim to fame in his senior year of college, and since then, the charmed life. Elise channeled that memory. Memories like that made it all worth it. Tonight's concert celebrated—would have celebrated—his newest arrangements, with time for a Q&A afterwards on what it took to be a musician after college. Elise just had to use the bathroom, damn it. Was she not allowed to use the bathroom?

“You can't play the classics anymore,” she said. “Mozart, Chopin, Debussy...”

“They'll fix my hand. I don't know.”

“I don't think they can fix it.”

Isaac pinched a bandage and pulled it. If this happened again, sometime in the future, maybe she would stop him, but she didn't want to risk losing her grip this time. She'd save the learning for later.

“People should listen to me,” he said.

“You don't give them much of a chance.”

Elise sent a text to Isaac's doctor, now on speed-dial, to let him know they would be arriving in the next ten minutes or so, depending on traffic. Isaac never played more than three hours away from their hometown. Any other medical professional would place Isaac on a seventy-two-hour psychological hold, or recommend him to inpatient, neither of which would fix anything. They'd had their share of trial and error when Isaac was little. All therapy did was eat into concert sales. Elise brushed against the raised pink scars on his wrist as she tried to shift her grasp without getting more blood on the pleather of Carnegie Mellon's chauffeur.

Isaac. Sweet, little Isaac. If he were to take off his suit coat, his tie, the white button-down she made him wear for fancy concerts, Elise knew of the horrors waiting beneath. Spiderwebbed skin. Little things she couldn't save him from. The release pain brought could only last so long—he always hurt himself again. From his stomach to his chest to his arms and now his hand, more violent with each transition. How long would it be before his right hand no longer did the trick? There was his left. Once that was too mottled and cracked to take the abuse, would he go for his face? She shuddered at the thought of her son poking at his eyeballs, connecting the dots of his freckles with a knife, smacking his delicate cheekbones onto the sharp edges of a baby grand when the violinists did not come in on time. He was such a beautiful boy.

Sometimes she couldn't remember if she loved him or not. She reframed her question.

“What did I do to you?” Elise asked. “What do you want from me?”

Her voice came out more defeated than she intended. Whatever. Best that Isaac knew how she really felt. She remembered the first time he played anything on the piano for her, back when he was in elementary school, how the notes had fallen from his hands like snow in a plastic globe. He wore his hair all messy then, not gelled into today's perfect facade.

He still smiled when he tapped on the keys. It was much easier to draw the line between manipulation and a cry for help when he was baby-faced and rambunctious, running through the hallways in their home and slicing his forearms on the kitchen knives. Elise tried not to argue with him. She organized his music when it annoyed him to have it in disarray, she made sure someone tuned the piano, she tried everything. Isaac was twenty-four now. He should know better. He should understand that hurting himself was a shitty thing to do to the mother who worked her ass off for him and all the people who paid money to see him play. Why couldn't she do enough for him?

Isaac groped at his injured hand, chewed his lip like it was gum. Flecks of scarlet splattered his teeth. "They told me they'd tune the piano. No one fucking listens to me. I'm tired of no one listening to me."

"So you slam it on yourself?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to tell me why."

"Because I'm an idiot, Mom."

An idiot? No, Isaac was not an idiot. Elise knew him from the very first concert, the very first piano gig at a charity gala. She knew him from the first injury. No one celebrated more than her when he was accepted into his conservatory of choice, no one put more effort into his popularity, no one held him tighter on the bathroom floor when he did something awful. He didn't get to hide behind that label. Isaac knew exactly what he was doing.

She sighed, calmed. "You're not an idiot."

"Right, I'm the best pianist on the East Coast. Let go of my hand."

She did love Isaac. Isaac needed her to love him. She hated him, too, and maybe he needed that just as much. An alarm on her phone marked two hours before the concert's planned beginning—Carnegie Mellon's employees were likely still on the phones, or they had found a suitable stand-in for Isaac's music.

The cityscape scrolled by the window, slowly, traffic blending the buildings into one another. Isaac shook his arm with enough force to jostle the whole vehicle, not strong enough to break anything.

“Not an idiot,” Elise said, finally. “Just a bad person.”

At this, Isaac froze. He turned from the outside world to meet her gaze, and for a moment, she saw some flicker of the child that she raised all those years ago. More specifically, the nights she came home from her third job at two in the morning, drawn down the apartment hallway by Isaac’s careful renditions of movie soundtracks. Their relationship wavered, even then—Isaac rested his elbows on the burner when she corrected him, or threw his whole body at the wall when he couldn’t remember something. He hit her when she held him, picked at scabs and scars, knocked into things until bruises blossomed over his skin as faded purple flowers. She could never be good enough for Isaac. She was never good enough for Isaac. But the piano, the piano was always beautiful. She couldn’t pinpoint the moment the music changed.

His deep, brown eyes caught the glare of the streetlights through the windows as the car inched down the street. UPMC Shadyside would be right around this corner. Isaac always looked younger when he’d been hurt.

He took a long breath that whistled in his throat. “It’s not hard to have things like I want them.” And a beat later, “Don’t you want me to be happy?”

Elise looked away from him. She was the parent, he was the child. She should have predicted something like this would happen. “Isaac,” she said.

“Don’t you blame me for this. I didn’t do anything.”

“Isaac.”

“I don’t need to play the piano if they’re not going to respect me when I do.”

“It wasn’t about the piano.”

“Then what—”

Elise pictured baby Isaac in the hospital, wrapped in a blanket, tucked safe into her arms. “It’s not about the piano,” she said, “it’s not about the people, it’s not about me. It’s about you.”

“You raised me.”

“You were always going to be like this.”

The chauffeur—eager to stop listening, no doubt—turned on the radio at full blast. He fiddled with the dial for a few minutes. Isaac settled into the seat, adjusted the lapel of his suit coat. No one could stop him when he got like this. They could only beg him to reconsider, they could only cede to his every demand. The chauffeur paused on a radio station playing “Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini” by Wilhelm Backhouse, according to the dashboard, a name Elise recognized but could not place in terms of other song titles or skill.

“He’s a better pianist than me,” said Isaac. In a final bid for freedom, he yanked himself from her grasp and smacked his palm into the window. A bloody print marred the glass and diluted what Elise could see of the hospital as they approached. Isaac recoiled. He bit his lip so hard that a drop of red traced down his chin.

“No one is better than you,” Elise said. She didn’t try to grab his hand again.